

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture and Research**

Specialty Crops in the Next Farm Bill

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Testimony of:

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Thank you Subcommittee Chair Davis and Ranking Member Grisham for the opportunity to testify before the Biotechnology, Horticulture and Research Subcommittee on the specialty crop provisions of the Farm Bill. My name is Charles Wingard and I am Vice-President of Field Operations for Walter P. Rawl & Sons in Pelion, SC. Three generations of our family have farmed in this area since the 1920s, and 10 family members oversee our operations today in a hands-on manner. We specialize in southern leafy greens such as collards, kale, mustard & turnip greens, and also produce a variety of summer vegetables in season along with a few other year round vegetable crops.

We have farm operations in several South Carolina counties and Florida and have farming relationships in Wisconsin, Florida, Virginia, Mississippi, and New York. Our produce is marketed and delivered throughout the Eastern United States, and about one-half of our leafy greens are washed and packaged in our own facility and sold as fresh-cut chopped greens, with the rest sold in bulk.

While I am here to represent myself as a specialty crop provider, I am also here as a member United Fresh Produce Association. As you know, United Fresh has been in existence since 1904 and is the only fresh produce association based in Washington, DC with members in all 50 states, and that represents all aspects of the fresh fruit and vegetable production chain. I serve as chairman of United Fresh's Government Relations Council which provides public policy guidance to the association. United Fresh is also helps coordinate the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, a 120-member coalition devoted to advocating for specialty crop programs in the Farm Bill.

The specialty crop industry is very grateful to you for all that this committee has done to support and advocate for the needs of the specialty crop sector through the Farm Bill, which is the single largest federal investment in the fresh produce industry. You have

recognized the immense value our sector brings to America's nutritional, economic and social well-being and we are very appreciative of that support.

It is in that context that I must address an issue of primary importance to our industry and one which our sector will be looking to you with high expectations for support. It will be no surprise to you that I am referring to immigration policy. The Farm Bill matters tremendously to specialty crop producers; it has done a great deal to advance the goal of ensuring Americans have access to an abundant supply of fresh fruits and vegetables. However, that goal cannot be attained without the seasonal workers needed to get crops from the field to consumers. While it is virtually impossible to know the exact numbers, this workforce is overwhelmingly foreign-born and not properly authorized. We in the produce industry have long advocated for changes to our nation's immigration system to address this. The federal agriculture guestworker program, known as H-2A, as often as not, does not provide adequate numbers of workers in a timely manner, often leading to crops going unharvested. Federal immigration policy must balance enforcement with a humane and effective program to allow foreign-born workers to come here to do the produce harvesting and processing jobs that

Americans simply won't. If that does not happen, then to be blunt, it doesn't matter what you do for us in the Farm Bill. If America's fruit and vegetable providers cannot retain or attract the skilled, dedicated workforce needed to get crops to the marketplace, then programs like Specialty Crop Block Grants won't help us a bit. Produce providers will be closely watching the progress of the Farm Bill and action on immigration reform; if immigration reform does not show progress soon, I expect that if you haven't already, you will be hearing specialty crop producers advocate for action on ag labor within the Farm Bill.

As you know, this Administration has begun to pursue stricter immigration policies. We in the produce industry are well-aware that enforcement of the law is needed and we support ensuring that our nation's borders are secure. However, I can tell you that the change in policies has created a real sense of fear within the immigrant community and that has begun to result in increasing problems for produce providers in being able to retain workers. With workers increasingly reluctant to come to work, the ability of produce providers to stay in business is increasingly threatened. And it is not just simply those foreign-born seasonal workers who will feel the impact of an enforcement-only policy. While the vast

majority of workers who hold jobs in the fields and packing sheds are foreign-born, the workers who hold jobs on down the chain, in areas such as transportation and retail, generally are American citizens. If workers at the front of the chain leave and they have no replacements, it is only a matter of time before those American workers down the line will also suffer.

We are aware that under the House of Representatives' rules of jurisdiction, immigration policy is not under this committee's purview. But it is this committee's constituency that will be among the hardest and first-hit by policies that lack an effective agriculture labor component. Congress has completely failed to act on agriculture's legitimate needs and all indications are that more enforcement and security-oriented policy changes will be coming. If the current situation continues or gets worse, produce providers are expecting you to ACT on their behalf, jurisdiction or no jurisdiction. Many members of this committee have repeatedly conveyed that you are aware of agriculture's needs and that is encouraging and is appreciated. However, there will come a time when saying the right things simply won't be enough – if policymakers continue down an enforcement-only path, the fruit and vegetable industry will expect you to take the actions necessary to step in and ensure that further

policy changes do not become finalized without an effective agriculture labor component included.

Without the dedicated and skilled workers to harvest the fruit and vegetable crops grown here in this country, logic dictates that we as a nation will then have to source those commodities from other countries, and for the first time in our history, make us unnecessarily dependent on other nations for something as fundamental as food. But this would be an economic and national security disaster that can be averted; as a nation, we do not have to choose between food security and border security – it is possible to have both. But only if Congress will actually take actions to craft a set of reforms to our nation’s immigration policies that strengthen security at the border and internally, and *simultaneously* provide a way for agriculture workers who are here currently to stay here legally, as well as policies that provide for a future legal workforce. As I mentioned, the fresh produce industry supports making America’s borders as secure as possible and upholding our nation’s immigration laws. But we also believe that by making much-needed improvements to America’s immigration system, Congress will significantly strengthen the policy foundations laid through the Farm

Bill that enable America's specialty crop producers to be among the world's most productive.

Regarding the Farm Bill, as I mentioned before, United Fresh is the coordinating body of the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance. For each successive Farm Bill, the Alliance has provided a set of recommendations about how those programs could maximize the ability of specialty crop producers to be successful. The Alliance is grateful that in the 2014 Farm Bill this committee acted on our recommendations, which our industry believes are sound policies that will enhance our ability to meet America's nutritional needs.

Briefly, a few highlights of the 2014 Farm Bill that enhance the work of specialty crop providers include:

- \$80 million a year for the Specialty Crop Research Initiative for industry-specific research; this program addresses the critical needs of the specialty crop industry by developing and disseminating science-based tools to address needs of specific crops and their regions;**
- \$75 million a year for the Plant Pest and Disease Program to eradicate harmful pests and diseases. These projects aim to prevent the introduction or spread of plant pests and diseases**

that threaten U.S. agriculture and the environment, as well as ensure the availability of a healthy supply of clean plant stock;

- **\$85 million per year for the Specialty Crop Block Grant program, including a multi-state program;**
- **Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) – Authorized under the 2002 Farm Bill, TASC has been used to address barriers prohibiting or threatening the exports of U.S. Specialty Crops. The program has had constant funding of \$9 million since the 2002 Farm Bill.**
- **Market Access Program (MAP) – To improve access to overseas markets for America’s agriculture producers. The program is funded at \$200 million per year.**

Furthermore, I want to highlight what has been done through your collaboration with United Fresh to promote federal feeding programs in the Farm Bill Nutrition Programs

The role of investment in federal nutrition programs cannot be overstated, this investment in nutrition programs increases consumption of fruits and vegetables which benefits the specialty crop industry.

For example, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program which will reach more than 4 million low-income elementary school children nationwide this coming school year. This highly effective program provides young students with a fresh fruit or vegetable snack every day at school and increases their overall consumption of a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. My state of South Carolina received \$3.27 M this school year to implement the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; this allows 153 elementary schools to participate and 60,000 students to benefit. How does this program translate to my business which is growing collard greens and other vegetables? Walter P. Rawls & Son has been a leader in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program since 2008. We have worked with South Carolina's Child Nutrition Director to ensure successful implementation, we have traveled to school districts all over our state to promote the program and help local schools effectively implement it, and we have developed fresh-cut vegetables and fruits in kid-friendly packs designed specifically for schools to use in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and in school lunch. We are South Carolina's champions for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program! This program is a WIN-WIN-WIN for agriculture and the produce industry, our kids and public health.

I'd also like to highlight the impact of FINI (Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentives) on helping SNAP families purchase more fresh fruits and vegetables. Providing produce incentives to SNAP families is an effective strategy to increase their fruit and vegetable consumption and improve the quality of their diet especially when the produce incentives can be used at grocery stores and supermarkets where these families shop and have access to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables are available year round. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption for 40 million SNAP recipients is another big WIN for specialty crops and public health.

In many instances Farm Bill specialty crop programs provide services and resources that growers are not always able to get on their own. For example, since 2008, the Clean Plant Network has provided nearly \$30,000,000 in support of 35 initiatives in the critical mission of providing clean planting stock which is essential to preventing highly dangerous pests and pathogens from destroying crops. Another example is the language in the 2014 Farm Bill providing for a multi-state program in the Specialty Crop Block Grant program that allows for the kind of regional response to threats such as plant disease that farmers cannot do individually.

While the lack of needed immigration policy reform is the greatest overarching current threat to America's specialty crop sector, the programs I just mentioned are also critical to addressing other important needs for fruit and vegetable production. This committee has done tremendous work to address our needs regarding market competitiveness, research, pest and disease management, opening foreign markets and nutrition programs that promote consumption. As a result, the produce industry is much better equipped to address these issues, and we believe that these tools are vital to helping providers do what they can to keep their operations viable and successful. Knowing that Congress is working to address significant budget constraints, we in the industry pledge to work with you to do all we can to keep these programs at their current funding levels. Our industry looks forward to working with you to promote American production of specialty crops. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and I will be happy to answer any questions.